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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000268

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO/PDAS WARLICK
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR MCDERMOTT, SHAPIRO

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [IR](#) [IS](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: HARIRI TO NEA A A/S FELTMAN AND NSC
SHAPIRO: "WE WILL WIN IF ELECTIONS ARE HELD ON TIME"

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) On March 5, Saad Hariri told visiting NEA Acting A/S Feltman and NSC Senior Director for the Middle East and North Africa Shapiro that if the June 2009 parliamentary elections were held on time, he was certain that his March 14 coalition would win. Asked why, Hariri pointed to March 14 candidates' victories in 11 of the last 12 elections among professional associations and university student elections. He also cited the significant turnout for the February 14 commemoration of his father's assassination as evidence that the Lebanese people were with March 14. Hariri was also extremely pleased with the March 1 formal opening of the Special Tribunal, which he said had been very well received in Lebanon. While he acknowledged that there were still divisions between the Maronite members of the coalition, he was confident that the lists of candidates would be successfully negotiated before the parliamentary elections. "It's hard but we'll get there." Acting A/S Feltman assured Hariri that the Obama Administration's support for Lebanon's sovereignty and independence remained strong and that no deals would be negotiated at Lebanon's expense.

2. (C) Turning to regional issues, Hariri said that the large USG donation for Gaza reconstruction had been viewed positively in the Arab world. When asked about recent statements from the Saudi (KSA) government which were seen as unhelpful to the Palestinian Authority (PA), Hariri responded that these should be interpreted in a larger context. "There is building Arab consensus about the need to confront Iran politically. KSA remains committed to Abu Mazen, but it is reaching out to Syria before the upcoming Arab League summit in Doha. It would be a major coup to pull Syria out of the sphere of Iranian influence." NSC Senior Director Shapiro cautioned that it would be a mistake to weaken the PA's standing as negotiations, led by Special Envoy Mitchell, commence with Israel. End Summary.

"WE WILL OFFER VOTERS
A STABLE AND PROSPEROUS VISION FOR LEBANON"

3. (C) Parliamentary Majority Leader Saad Hariri, along with his advisors Nader Hariri, Ghattas Khoury, Hani Hamoud, and

Nadine Chehab, organized a formal meeting and press availability, followed by a dinner, at his residence for visiting Acting A/S for Near East Affairs Jeffrey Feltman, NSC Senior Director for the Middle East and North Africa Dan Shapiro, the Ambassador, DCM, Pol/Econ Chief, Special Assistant, and NEA Staff Assistant Oni Blair. Hariri expressed his confidence about the upcoming elections. "We will offer voters a vision of a stable Lebanon where economic opportunities can grow and citizens will become more prosperous. Clearly, militias -- and Hizballah is a militia -- need chaos in order to keep their power. We will show Lebanese citizens that chaos is no longer in their best interest." He cautioned, however, that a major security incident could derail the elections. He was pleased with recent statements from KSA, after discussions with Syria, which stressed the importance of free and democratic elections in Lebanon. He asked USG officials to echo this sentiments in their public remarks.

¶4. (C) He also mentioned that March 14 has learned from its adversaries and was developing a five-year strategic political plan. March 14 will run parliamentary candidates in the south, where the opposition is very strong, with full understanding that they cannot win. "However, this will set the stage for the 2010 municipal elections, where there is room for independents to win." He claimed there were a number of independent Shia citizens who traveled from the south and the Bekaa Valley to attend the February 14 rally in Martyr's square and said a long-term strategy was needed to empower and embrace these alternative Shia voices.

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DISAGREEMENTS WITHIN MARCH 14 LINGER

¶5. (C) When asked about Christian voters, Hariri said that while many were becoming discontented with Michel Aoun, they were not being won over by the March 14 Christian parties led by his allies Samir Geagea and Amine Gemayel. Hariri said that some may become supporters of President Sleiman, but the majority of those Christians who leave Aoun will remain independent. "This will be worrying to Hizballah," said Hariri. "If Aoun loses, they have lost their 'Christian' cover and will seem more menacing to Lebanese voters."

¶6. (C) Hariri also acknowledged that there were still serious differences between Gemayel and Geagea about the composition of the upcoming candidate lists and he urged Acting A/S Feltman to stress the need for unity during upcoming discussions with both leaders. Hariri also said they need to be realistic about the number of candidates each would be allowed to designate. Hariri said he was willing to reduce the number of seats he would designate from 37 to 28-30, creating room for his allies to designate more (having already ceded seats to other Sunni groups, i.e., Mikati, Jemayaa Islamiah, etc.). "However, according to their requests, they'd like me to only have 15. That's unacceptable. I have the majority of votes and it is my right to have a reasonable number of seats." Hariri also said that he was in the midst of negotiations with former Prime Minister Najib Mikati regarding a candidates list in the Sunni stronghold of Tripoli. "I am sure he will run on my list, but we are in 'discussions' about some of his proposed candidates which I simply cannot accept. This, too, will work out in the end -- it's just part of the process." Finally, Hariri stated that he would be meeting on March 6 with Armenian Tashnaq leaders, considered to be possible, long-shot "swing voters" in the upcoming elections.

WITH SYRIA,
GLAD U.S. IS SPEAKING TO FRIENDS BEFORE FOES

¶7. (C) Hariri admitted that there had been concern in Lebanon at the end of 2008 about USG plans to engage with

Syria. However, now he seems quite comfortable with the approach being adopted by U.S. officials. "We asked that you speak with your friends before you speak with your foes and this has happened. It really has strengthened our position, both as Lebanese and as Arab moderates, and the public statements have been excellent." Hariri cautioned, however, that dealing with the Syrians would be difficult. "You need to show them some teeth." Hariri believes that the U.S. should push immediately for the most difficult issue -- getting Syria back to the negotiating table with Israel. "Don't bargain with them on minor issues. They will just use that as an excuse to bog you down." Hariri also favored a visit by Special Envoy Mitchell to Damascus before the Lebanese parliamentary elections in June. "He could help stress the importance of free and fair elections in Lebanon."

¶8. (C) Acting A/S Feltman responded that his visit to Beirut had been carefully arranged to show support for Lebanon before his visit to Damascus. He assured Hariri that he would tell Syrian officials that the U.S. would be monitoring the Lebanese elections closely and Syria would be judged on its actions, not just its words. NSC Senior Director Shapiro echoed the statement, saying that the Obama Administration's expectations were realistic as engagement with Syria begins. A U.S. ambassador is unlikely to be returned to Damascus until there have been concrete deliverables from the Syrian side and successful Lebanese elections would be one of the key factors used to judge an improvement in Syria's international policies.

REGIONALLY,
PRIMARY CONCERN IS IRAN

¶9. (C) In reviewing recent discussions on the margins of the Gaza Donors Conference in Egypt, both Acting A/S Feltman and

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NSC Senior Director Shapiro expressed concern about the tone of public statements from Qatar and KSA. "Neutrality (regarding the Palestinian factions) actually strengthens Hamas and weakens the PA. This is not a positive development on the eve of renewed peace efforts and could affect the ability for the U.S. to play its intended role in the negotiations." Acting A/S Feltman stressed President Obama's personal commitment to a robust engagement for a two state solution, which has been long requested by Lebanese officials. Hariri admitted that Lebanon would be one of the largest beneficiaries of a regional peace treaty.

¶10. (C) Hariri, who has close relations with the Saudi leadership, responded that he believes the KSA remains steadfast in its support for the PA and Abu Mazen. However, he said that Iran -- and not necessarily the plight of the Palestinians -- was at the forefront of Arab political discussions these days. "The Arabs are ready to confront Iran politically and they are working to strengthen their positions with Syria and Qatar before the upcoming summit in Doha. You are seeing KSA statements tailored for Syrian ears in the short-run, but this does not represent a long-term shift in the KSA's support for the PA." He also said that the U.S. should feel confident in Egypt's support for the PA. "There is no way they will work to empower Hamas." Hariri asked the USG officials to have a series of frank and private discussions with Arab leaders about the evolving USG strategy towards Iran. "This will allay their fears and allow you to strengthen regional support for a collaborative approach."

¶11. (C) When asked about current Hizballah actions, Hariri said that he believes Hizballah will not try to disrupt the Lebanese elections by starting another fight with Israel. However, he also believes Hizballah would engage in a fully armed response if there was any military attack on Iran. He also noted that there are daily skirmishes in Lebanon between forces of Hizballah and Amal, nominally Shia allies in the opposition, and suggested it reflected divisions between Iran

(close to Hizballah) and Syria (close to Amal). "You know Speaker Berri is Syria's man -- not Iran's. If Syria cut off supply routes to Hizballah and stopped harboring their military training camps, Hizballah would be weakened. With new instructions from Damascus, Speaker Berri could turn into a new man."

ACTING A/S FELTMAN'S PUBLIC REMARKS AT QOREITEM

¶12. (C) During a brief press availability at Qoreitem Acting A/S Feltman reiterated earlier public statements from the President and Secretary expressing strong USG support for Lebanon's independence and sovereignty. Feltman also highlighted the importance of the recent opening at the Hague of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon.

¶13. (C) Acting A/S Feltman and Senior Director Shapiro cleared this cable.

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